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Lose Weight

Is your #1 New Year's resolution to lose weight? Help is here. You can reach your healthy weight loss goal with these tips from the experts.

Getting Started on Losing Weight Long Term

Losing weight and keeping it off is not easy. Before you get started on a weight loss program, consider the following tips. They should help you reach your goal of obtaining and maintaining a healthy weight.

Set the Right Goals

Setting effective goals is an important first step. Most people trying to lose weight focus on just that one goal: weight loss. However, the most productive areas to focus on are the dietary and exercise changes that will lead to long-term weight control. Successful weight managers are those who select two or three goals at a time that they are willing to take on.

Keep in mind that effective goals are specific, attainable, and forgiving. For example, "exercise more" is a wonderful goal, but it's not specific. "Walk five miles everyday" is specific and measurable, but is it attainable if you're just starting out? "Walk 30 minutes every day" is more attainable, but what happens if you're held up at work one day and there's a thunderstorm during your walking time another day? "Walk 30 minutes, five days each week" is specific, attainable, *and* forgiving.

Reward Success (But Not With Food!)

Rewards that you can control can be used to encourage you to attain your weight control goals, especially those that have been difficult for you to reach.

An effective reward is something that is desirable, timely, and contingent on meeting your goal. Rewards may include treating yourself to a movie or music CD or taking an afternoon off from work or just an hour of quiet time away from family. Keep in mind that numerous small rewards, delivered for meeting smaller goals, are more effective than bigger rewards, requiring a long, difficult effort.

Balance Your (Food) Checkbook

This means that you should monitor your eating behavior by observing and recording some aspect of your eating behavior, such as how many calories you eat in a day, how many servings of fruits and vegetables you eat per day, how often and for how long you exercise, etc., or an outcome of these behaviors, such as weight.

Doing this can really help you determine how you are doing and what you need to do to meet your weight control goals.

Avoid a Chain Reaction

Identify those social and environmental cues that tend to encourage undesired eating, and then work to change those cues. For example, you may learn that you're more likely to overeat while watching television, or whenever treats are on display by the office coffee pot.

Then work to sever the association of eating with the cue (don't eat while watching television), avoid or eliminate the cue (leave coffee room immediately after pouring coffee). In general, visible and accessible food items are often cues for unplanned eating.

Get the (Fullness) Message

Changing the way you go about eating can make it easier to eat less without feeling deprived. It takes 15 or more minutes for your brain to get the message you've been fed. So slow down the rate that you eat food. That will allow satiety (fullness) signals to begin to develop by the end of the meal. Eating lots of vegetables or fruit can also make you feel fuller. Another trick is to use smaller plates so that moderate portions do not appear meager. In addition, changing your eating schedule, or setting one, can help you reach your goal, especially if you tend to skip, or delay, meals and overeat later.

Healthy Eating in an Imperfect World

Eat nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Choose whole-grain, nonfat, or low-fat foods. Be physically active daily. Watch calories. Limit the fat. Get enough calcium.

We live in a world with a dizzying amount of scientific research pointing to foods and habits that make for good health. In an ideal universe, that's good news. If we exercise and eat right, we give our bodies essential nourishment and movement to work at their best.

Yet our world is far from ideal. There are responsibilities, deadlines, and food or lifestyle preferences that get in the way of healthy eating. Real life happens, and in the rush to satisfy daily hunger and desires, we may succumb to less-than-healthy choices.

It doesn't always have to be that way. No matter what our lives are like, there's always room for improvement.

"There is always something positive that can be done for our health," says Sue Moores, MSRD, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association (ADA). "Maybe it's eating an extra fruit a day, maybe it's cooking a food a different way, or maybe it's (trying) a new food that's out that we didn't know much about because of all the ethnic influences."

Making an effort to eat healthy does not mean abandoning our lives. Find a few minutes to think about a small nutrition goal, how you think you can reach it, and what can prevent you from success. Then devise a plan.

Without this vital planning stage, all good intentions can be for naught. "People need to spend just a little bit of effort planning ahead so that they just don't wait until the last minute until they're ravenously hungry and then make poor choices," says Tara Gidus, RD, also a spokeswoman for the ADA. She says people think preparing for a healthy diet takes a lot more effort than it really does.

To make it easy for aspiring healthy eaters, we have put together a list of common obstacles that get in the way of good nutrition, and asked the experts for some advice on how to overcome these road blocks.

Busy Bees Can Eat Healthy, Too

Demands of work, family, and community can keep people from preparing for healthy meals. This is true for workaholics, supermoms and dads, overachievers, frequent travelers, and a host of other people trying to beat the clock. Because of their lack of time, these folks often turn to quick-fix foods that are high in fat, sugar, sodium, or calories, and low in essential nutrients.

The solution isn't to find more time, but to work with the schedule you do have. The minutes spent perusing fast-food or vending machine options could be used toward time to visit the grocery store, where you can pick up prepared salads, sandwiches, and meats, pre-washed and cut fruits and vegetables, canned soups, low-calorie and low-fat frozen meals, yogurt, string cheese, and cereals.

There may be a bit more effort involved in shopping at the supermarket, but wasteful hours of worry about flab and low energy do tend to go away with healthy eating. With well-balanced meals, we usually feel more positive about ourselves and our surroundings.

"We continue to see a really strong link between how we eat and what we eat, and being well," says Moores. "The better we do on our part to choose good foods and eat healthfully, the more effect it has on helping us stay well, feel good, and enjoy life."

Here are some more healthy tips for busy bees:

- Cook a bigger batch of food on the weekends, and refrigerate or freeze for weekday consumption.
- Set an alarm for mealtimes. Even if you're buried in a project, don't skip meals; designate a time to eat.
- Try not to do anything else while eating. Mindless consumption prevents the enjoyment of food. When that happens, people tend to eat more and eat unhealthy alternatives.
- Put fresh or dried fruit where you can see it to remind yourself of your goal to eat healthy. Bananas, grapes, and apples make handy and nutritious snack items.
- If at a restaurant, turn down the supersize option, and choose baked and broiled instead of fried.
- Order the lunch portion at dinnertime, and hold off on fatty condiments.
- Keep handy snacks around, such as fruits, dried fruits, nuts, seeds, trail mix, carrot or celery sticks, wraps, and sandwiches.

Motivating Couch Potatoes

You love your TV shows, and can't think of a better way to relax after a hard day's work. Yet studies have found a strong relationship between tube-watching and obesity. Perhaps it's because TV viewing is a sedentary activity. Or maybe it's because people tend to eat mindlessly in front of the screen.

If you eat in front of the TV, you probably have no sense of how much you're eating, says Christine Filardo, MSRD, director of public relations for the Produce for Better Health Foundation (PBH), a nonprofit consumer education group. PBH helps run the national "5 A Day" campaign to increase fruit and vegetable consumption 5 or more a day for 75% of Americans by 2010.

"If you're sitting there [in front of the TV], and you rip open a bag of chips, it's very easy to eat the entire bag of chips and not really think about what you're doing, because your main focus is not on what you're eating, but on what you're watching," says Filardo.

Substitute candy and chips for light popcorn. Baby carrots with a low-fat dip and a bowl of fruit are also good alternatives. Also try light yogurt instead of ice cream.

Junk Food Junkies

Planning healthy meals and snacks ahead of time is crucial for people who want to curb their junk food cravings.

"Some junk food junkies just fall into that habit, because there's nothing else around, and so they hit the vending machine, or stop at a convenience store, and that's what's there," says Gidus.

If you must have junk food, sample the healthier alternatives, such as baked chips, dried fruit, or sugar-free Popsicle. Look for low-calorie, low-sugar, and low-fat options.

It also helps to determine what element in the junk food you like. "A lot of people don't realize that they are looking for something in particular," says Gidus. "I ask [clients], 'At night you tend to eat this, this, and this, so it sounds to me like you're looking for something crunchy,' and they'll say, 'Yeah, I guess, I am.'"

In place of chips, the crunch-lover could try chomping on light popcorn, whole grain crackers, carrot sticks, red peppers, and rice cakes.

For the sweet tooth, sugar-free pudding, sugar-free Jell-O, fruit bars, baked apple, fresh fruits, and dried fruits are options.

If you have to have chocolate, keep a small, lower-calorie portion of it around, recommends Mark Kantor, PhD, associate professor in the department of nutrition and food science at the University of Maryland. He likes little, individually wrapped chocolates, because they can give enough satisfaction, but can discourage overindulgence as it takes effort to open up each morsel.

The Right Food for Weekend Warriors

You're typically not that active, but this weekend your friends have invited you to a hike, to go skiing, or to a 5K run. What type of foods will give you enough energy to make it through strenuous events?

"I don't think any food is going to help [the weekend warrior]," says Kantor, noting that no edible will be able to prevent injuries caused by being unconditioned.

It is, however, important to eat before or during a demanding activity, as tiredness can lead to injury. To keep energy levels up, pack dried fruits, cereals, and trail mix.

Maintaining hydration is also key. "People don't realize how much water they can lose during exercise," says Kantor. "Even during the winter, if it's dry, you can really sweat a lot and the sweat evaporates quite quickly so you don't even realize how much water you're losing."

There are people who turn to energy bars or drinks for an extra boost. Be careful of this option as some products may be as high in sugar and empty in nutrients as candy bars. Read the packaging label. Moore says a good energy bar will have 5 grams of fat or less, 3-5 grams of fiber, up to 15 grams of protein, and 15-25 grams of carbohydrates. Stay away from products that have sugar or corn syrup as their first ingredient.

Also look at the vitamin and mineral content, particularly if you're having more than one serving of the bar or drink. Make sure the vitamin and mineral content adds up to about 25% or less. Some energy bars are heavily fortified, and too much vitamins and minerals can be harmful. Too much copper, for instance, can interfere with iron absorption and function in the body.

Kitchen Phobes

Don't know how to cook a healthy meal? No problem.

"You don't have to be a gourmet cook to eat healthfully," says Filardo. "A couple of chicken breasts and sliced up sweet potatoes can be roasted in the oven. You can stir fry a bag of baby spinach with some garlic and olive oil."

Take advantage of the work that has already been done for you, adds Filardo. There are low-calorie frozen foods, prepared salads, and cut-up fruit readily available at grocery stores.

If you get take-out, try healthier versions of the food. For example, when ordering pizza, go light on the cheese and order a salad to go along with your meal. At Chinese restaurants, ask the chef to use less oil. Order vegetables, and go easy on the rice, noodles, and deep-fried foods. For soups, go with the broth-based option. Choose tomato sauce as opposed to cream sauce for pasta.

Indeed, no matter where you are on the spectrum of healthy eating, it is possible to make a positive change without drastically changing your lifestyle. Make enough of these small changes in your diet over time, and a healthy body won't have to be just an ideal. It can become reality.

Exercise and Weight Control

Regular physical activity is an important part of effective weight control. It helps to control your weight by using excess calories that otherwise would be stored as fat. Exercise also helps prevent many diseases and improve your overall health.

Your weight is determined by the number of calories you eat each day minus what your body uses. Everything you eat contains calories, and everything you do uses calories, including sleeping, breathing, and digesting food. Any physical activity in addition to what you normally do will burn those extra calories.

Balancing the number of calories you expend through exercise and physical activity with the calories you eat will help you achieve your desired weight. The key to successful weight control and improved overall health is making physical activity a part of your daily routine.

What Are the Health Benefits of Exercise?

Research consistently shows that regular exercise, combined with healthy eating, is the most efficient and healthful way to control your weight.

In addition to helping to control your weight, research shows that regular physical activity can reduce your risk for several diseases and conditions and improve your overall quality of life. Regular exercise can help prevent:

- **Heart disease and stroke.** Daily physical activity can help prevent heart disease and stroke by strengthening your heart muscle, lowering your blood pressure, raising your HDL ("good" cholesterol) and lowering LDL cholesterol ("bad" cholesterol), improving blood flow, and increasing your heart's working capacity.
- **High blood pressure.** Regular exercise reduces blood pressure in people with high blood pressure (hypertension).
- **Diabetes.** By reducing body fat, physical activity can help to prevent and control type 2 diabetes.
- **Back pain.** By increasing muscle strength and endurance and improving flexibility and posture, regular exercise can prevent back pain.
- **Osteoporosis.** Regular weight-bearing exercise promotes bone formation and may prevent many forms of bone loss associated with aging.

Regular physical activity can also improve mood and the way you feel about yourself. Exercise is likely to reduce depression and anxiety and help you to better manage stress.

What Type of Exercise Is Best?

It does not matter what type of physical activity you perform -- sports, planned exercise, household chores, yard work, or work-related tasks -- all are beneficial.

Over the past few years, exercise advertisements have targeted simplified exercise routines for weight reduction and maintenance. Some exercise advertisements sell the belief that one machine will work your entire body and give you the results you need. However, many of these machines may only be good for one type of conditioning, such as cardiovascular; these machines also have limitations to the type of exercise you can do and they are not good for everyone. To determine the best type of exercise program for you, talk to your doctor and a certified athletic trainer.

How Much Exercise Should I Do?

Studies show that even the most inactive people can gain significant health benefits if they accumulate just 30 minutes or more of physical activity per day.

For the greatest overall health benefits, experts suggest 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise (see below) most days of the week plus some form of anaerobic exercise (see below) such as muscle strengthening activity and stretching at least two to three times a week.

If you have been inactive for a while, you may want to start with less strenuous activities such as walking or swimming at a comfortable pace. Beginning at a slow pace will allow you to become physically fit without straining your body. Once you are in better shape, you can gradually do more strenuous activity.

What Is Aerobic Exercise?

Aerobic exercise is any activity involving large muscles, done for an extended period of time, that makes the heart and lungs work harder. Aerobic exercise can be done for weight loss, but it also provides cardiovascular benefits. Examples of aerobic exercise include walking, biking, jogging, swimming, aerobic classes and cross-country skiing.

What Is Anaerobic Exercise?

Anaerobic exercise usually refers to resistance training. Anaerobic exercise is done primarily for increased muscle mass. Weight training is a form of anaerobic exercise.

Moderate-Intensity Activities

Moderate-intensity activities include some of the things you may already be doing during a day or week, such as gardening and housework. These activities can be done in short spurts -- 10 minutes here, 8 minutes there. Alone, each action does not have a great effect on your health, but regularly accumulating 30 minutes of activity over the course of the day can result in substantial health benefits.

To become more active throughout your day, take advantage of any chance to get up and move around. Here are some examples:

- Take a short walk around the block.
- Rake leaves.
- Play actively with the kids.
- Walk up the stairs instead of taking the elevator.
- Mow the lawn.
- Take an activity break -- get up and stretch or walk around.
- Park your car a little farther away from your destination and walk the extra distance.

The point is not to make physical activity an unwelcome chore, but to make the most of the opportunities you have to be active.

Before You Get Started

Before starting any exercise program, be sure to talk with your doctor. He or she can offer suggestions about which type of program would be best for you.

